Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety in the Costa Rican English Learning Context: The Need for Flexible and Supportive Teachers

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Abstract - El FLCA se ha convertido en un punto de discusión en el ámbito educativo debido a los aspectos que involucra así como a los personajes responsables del desencadenamiento del mismo en los alumnos. Esta investigación bibliográfica argumenta el hecho de que los profesores tienen un mayor impacto en este fenómeno de lo que se ha afirmado a través de las diversas conclusiones hechas por Dewaele en sus artículos. También hace referencia a las múltiples acciones y decisiones con las que el profesor puede afectar positiva y negativamente a la ansiedad de los alumnos en el aula. Entre los argumentos desarrollados en este trabajo se encuentran la responsabilidad de los profesores de tener en cuenta las preocupaciones emocionales de los alumnos sobre la identidad y la presión social, de apoyar a los alumnos de forma eficaz cuando se enfrentan a problemas lingüísticos y psicológicos relacionados con la lengua, y de proporcionar feedback de forma eficaz y crear entornos de clase flexibles. Además, esta investigación sugiere que, dado el impacto suficientemente significativo que los educadores tienen en la FLCA de los alumnos, estos deben tomar conciencia de ello y reconocer su deber de considerar esta condición a través de las acciones que llevan a cabo en su profesión en el aula.

Resumen – The FLCA experienced by Costa Rican high school students can be influenced and affected by the decisions and behaviors of the English teachers in the classroom. Students face concerns regarding identity and social pressure, which are elements shown to affect students FLCA. The teacher is responsible for considering the presence of those concerns in the classroom to implement a correct approach to the language teaching and avoid the increase of the condition. Furthermore, educators are responsible for using the appropriate and effective observing and consideration of students' processes and difficulties. This strengthens the positive position the teacher has in the classroom. In addition, practicing self-evaluation when giving feedback and the fostering of positive learning environments in the classroom are other responsibilities that, if developed correctly, can create a beneficiary and safe environment in which students could comfortably learn, without triggering their FLCA. It is imperative that teachers become aware of the role they have in the FLCA of the learners and act accordingly to promote a better learning experience for ESL high school students in Costa Rica.

Keywords - Costa Rica, English as a Second Language, English Teaching, Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety

I. INTRODUCTION

In many developing countries, the English language is considered the universal or international language of preference to connect and interact with the rest of the world [5]. In Costa Rica, English education has been present since the beginning of the 20th century [16], and its development over the years has expanded due to various reasons. Two of the main areas in which this expansion has been felt are mainly socially and linguistically. Socially, Costa Ricans have been exposed to English mainly through globalization and tourism, increasing the familiarization of citizens with the language and the awareness of its demand. Furthermore, linguistically, English possesses a high hierarchical position in comparison to other languages [18], which commonly attaches the use of the language to a better social status, economy, and job opportunities.

In recent years, the Ministry of Education (MEP) has promoted as their goal "to ensure that the student population acquires the necessary skills and learning that will allow them to satisfy the communicative needs in a second language with an independent user level to face the intercultural challenges demanded by a globalized society" (MEP, 2021, p. 23). However, many factors affect students' ability to successfully accomplish this goal in practice. The perception of the language in the country, the students, the teacher, and the teaching environment are all involved in this process. Furthermore, the whole second language learning journey is a living experience constructed by the learners; therefore, their perceptions of themselves and their surroundings are going to highly influence their outcomes. For this reason, it is imperative to inquire into the challenges Costa Rican students face along their English learning processes so teachers can consider those into the development and the evolution of the students' skills.

In our Costa Rican context, one of the main challenges to which students are exposed when learning English as a second language is Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA). It is a concept that describes the overwhelming feeling students experience when learning a language different from their first language. Among the studies that have been conducted regarding the FLCA and the connection it has with the approach and attitude of the teacher, most of them concluded that teachers are for the most part not responsible for the classroom anxiety felt by the students in their classes. Nevertheless, I highly disagree with the manner in which this conclusion is made and

how it is almost generalized. This conclusion diminishes and ignores scenarios of the pressure and burden added to students by the teacher given their superior positions and the influence they have on the students' perceptions of their own language journeys.

Because FLCA is widespread among Costa Rican students, addressing it is necessary to improve the educational system and teachers' accountability. Throughout this essay, the way in which teachers can create struggling rules and unnecessary tense environments through their assessments and feedback is going to be discussed. Moreover, the importance of teachers acknowledging FLCA's existence and assuming their duty of creating flexible and positive environments instead is acknowledged. Because learning a new language brings with it a full journey of challenges and changes to which students must adapt, both linguistically and psychologically, it is imperative that teachers help to ease the pressure students are going through, instead of creating harsh and anxious environments.

II. TEACHER'S ROLE

Regarding the study made by Dewaele et al. [12], where the concepts of Foreign Language Enjoyment (FLE) and Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCA) were analyzed, they were able to find out that FLE and FLCA are not completely opposite and that both phenomena can co-exist at the same time when the student is developing their language skills. This conclusion provides information about how there are no specific factors in the classroom which fully influenced the students' enjoyment or anxiety levels respectively. Rather, the triggering of both aspects from the same factors interchangeably is noted. In addition, when this finding was applied to the teacher in the classroom, another study made by Dewaele [13] related to the effect of certain teacher characteristics on the levels of FLE and FLCA of students in the classroom backed up the previous claim. This study confirmed that teachers influenced both prospects with a slight difference in degree, being FLE higher in comparison to FLCA. From these conclusions, as well as from information which states that FLCA is influenced by the language, the learning process, the environment, and the student characteristics [19], one can understand that a teacher is not fully responsible for the students' anxiety in the classroom. Nevertheless, it does not completely mean that the teachers cannot affect the levels of students' FLCA significantly. It might be perceived as so when Dewaele et al. stated that "effective teachers fuel learners' enthusiasm and enjoyment and do not spend too much time worrying about their FLCA" [12,p. 14]. However, allowing teachers to free themselves from their responsibility regarding the students' condition does not ensure that the levels of FLCA in the students would decrease either. Considering the actions, words, and decisions through which the teacher can trigger or decrease the students' anxiety when working in the classroom is valuable and supportive to tackle the obstacle face by the students when learning English in the Costa Rican classrooms.

A. Considering emotional concerns regarding identity

Firstly, when a person is learning a second language, their identity is one of the first elements affected by the difficulties and challenges the learning process carries with it. Metaphorically, learning a new language requires starting to build one's identity from scratch given that language is both an element and source of identity [21]. The learners' humor, goals, and concerns are all part of being and having a sense of self in the world. Nevertheless, when learners are faced with issues such as the inability to express themselves in the same manner as usual, they might feel frustrated, stressed, anxious, and scared. Furthermore, the overall consequence of this situation is usually the triggering of the language ego which commonly results in the avoidance of the second language [2].

Language ego is a concept that encompasses the cultural and psychological factors that influence the attitudes and the perception a language learner has of the language, the learning process, and him/herself as a learner [9]. In other words, it is the position a person takes regarding the language when required to compromise their already structured identity to a risky process such as learning. Furthermore, in the classroom, factors that can trigger the common reaction of the language ego are present. Some examples are early on difficulties regarding understanding the language, the construction and utterance of ideas and opinions, and the repetitious obtention of the same academic results without noticeable progress. In addition, other difficulties are directly related to the people in the classroom such as the embracing of comments and reactions from classmates and the teacher when committing mistakes. The latter is especially common in the high schools' contexts, where students are afraid of being teased or even bullied.

Therefore, considering that both language and identity are connected and are able to influence each other [1], it is in fact an aspect teachers should consider important to acknowledge and eventually contemplate in the manner they approach their teaching practices. A comprehensive attitude, assistance to students in the immersion to the new language and culture, and the embracing of group identity are suggested to be incorporated to help students in their journeys [23]. At the same time, encouragement of good values and behaviors are aspects of mitigating bullying in the classroom that will create safe environments which are beneficial to all students, independently of their FLCA conditions. Through the reflection and inclusion of these elements in the classroom, teachers can make a change in the learning process.

Furthermore, due to how the identity journey of each student revolves around them throughout their lives, teachers might not be able to stop or avoid the rise of their FLCA with a significant and constant impact. The actions suggested will neither solve nor change the identity issues the students will face. In fact, additional contributions from the student might be needed in order to evoke a long-term impact, such as willingness to make mistakes in the process, perseverance, and self-analysis. Nevertheless, by working on the application of these suggestions, educators would be able to identify and avoid

triggering factors such as the previously mentioned. This will eventually lead students to enjoy the learning process without falling into their language egos as easily.

B.   *Considering students' social pressure concerns*

Secondly, specifically in the Costa Rican context, the social pressure influencing students to learn English as a second language is significant. There are several reasons why English has become a common language to use and is consider important. Costa Rica's economy has developed in recent years mostly based on technological and language skills [16] that can be seen reflected in fields such as tourism and engineering [3]. Areas in which, because of globalization and the development of the country, people have directly faced the influence of the English language. This influence has been felt in the areas where Costa Ricans work and study, due to the presence of native speakers, as well as the raising need of companies for English speakers, which has resulted in the popular feeling of pressure for learning English as a second language.

Furthermore, in the context of students undergoing their secondary education, they are considered learners who are in the process of facing adulthood and the working field. As a result, parents, teachers, and friends will regularly advise high school students to learn English [6] based on the reality perceived around them. Moreover, this idea will later be reinforced by the students' own experiences in their social and educational environments. Therefore, students get to the classroom with prejudices regarding the language, its difficulty, and the consequences of not being able to learn the language. For instance, among these predisposed consequences considered are the limitations to access better social and economic positions. These prejudices will most likely weigh on the students' minds as barriers and intervene in the natural and effective performance of the learners.

An example of the social pressure mentioned can be found in the study made by Ennser-Kananen et al. [15] about neoliberalism and the reasons behind second language learning in Costa Rica and the United States. In this study a series of interviews were conducted with university students in which they answered questions related to their own reasons to study English and German, respectively. Among the Costa Rican interviewers, one stated that she had decided to enroll in an English course once, even when she knew that the teacher was not a good instructor, due to the popular opinion of English being important in the country. The comment shared reflects one of the many views of the language that students who are in the Costa Rican public high schools could have. Additionally, it highlights the role social pressure plays in the willingness and comfortability students will show when learning English.

Realistically, teachers cannot take on the duty of analyzing the reasons behind each student's motivation given that there are already many elements of which the teacher is in charge. Each student is different and their reasons for learning a new language could vary considerably. While some students could be motivated by personal interests, others might be motivated by grades, or as in the case previously mentioned, they will be motivated by social pressure. However, considering the reality of the language in the country can lead to having an extended comprehension of the attitude teachers should avoid. Promoting further overstatements related to the need of the language, the consequences of not learning it, and the demand for perfection are some of the actions teachers can evade when interacting with students in the classroom. These actions can ease the learning time and avoid the increase of the levels of FLCA.

C.   *Supporting students effectively*

Third, teachers play a big role in increasing or decreasing students' FLCA through their approach to assistance and consideration of student's individual scenarios regarding assessments. As mentioned before, students learning a second language already bring with them emotional and social baggage even before entering the classroom. Once there, the teacher is in charge among many roles, of transmitting and assessing the knowledge that students will acquire through exercises and evaluations. Nevertheless, it is through these assessments that students will measure their own language abilities and skills, basing their self-perception and capacities on the results obtained. The latter will then bring the FLCA into the process, evoking anxious thoughts and feelings regarding their journeys.

Because of this, teachers have to be careful of the manner in which they assess students and the level to which they take into account individual cases. The teacher's position involves the decision-making process, and the considerations taken when selecting and designing assessments for the students. For example, if within a group, there are some students that come from rural areas where English has not been taught, these students might struggle more than others to understand or perform well in tasks. However, it is up to the teacher to consider their situation and come up with a strategy with which the students that are behind could feel they are still learning and progressing. Eventually, the students will be able to improve their skills and reach the level required, without entering a helpless emotional stage. This does not mean that the teacher must arrange the class based on the students that struggle the most, but rather that he/she is going to give the right to all students to obtain the scaffolding process that motivates them to keep learning.

Furthermore, there are other aspects in which the teacher and their physical presence in the classroom will affect the students. One of them involves the attitudes the teacher has regarding the struggles and results of the students once the assessments are applied in the classroom. Because, when faced with obstacles, students will look for support from a reliable source such as the teachers. The educators' reactions, comments, and decisions will function as another base for students to confirm or deny their ideas regarding their progress. This matter will increase especially when performing tasks or activities that require more exposure such as the case of speaking or oral activities [10] in which they obtained almost instant feedback from the teacher through

their reactions and comments.

If these aspects are not considered, what can be the result is the shift of situation anxiety, that is understood as isolated anxiety limited to a specific task or situation into a connection between the anxiety arousal and the second language itself [10]. This phenomenon comes from the constant negative struggle students have when in contact with the target language. For this reason, it is imperative that the teacher be aware of the reactions that students might have and consider assessing based on the learners' individual contexts as part of its responsibilities for the well-being of the learners. All the aspects mentioned will allow learners to challenge themselves while promoting perseverance and interest in their linguistic development.

D.   Considering FLCA strategies to give feedback

Sixth, feedback is one of the prospects that students would more commonly see in the English classroom. Its general function allows teachers to transmit information they consider important for the students' improvement [11]. In the ESL classroom this element would naturally focus on the students' linguistic skills and will be given in different ways, such as written comments or oral speeches. Moreover, when learning a new language, learners usually feel the need to not just understand and learn the language itself but also observe how they are displaying this understanding. For this, feedback works as one of the main forms of communication by which the students can get hindsight of these aspects and obtain important information to improve in their process.

Furthermore, due to the individualistic and direct nature of feedback, it is also known as one of the main triggers of FLA [24] and as a byproduct, FLCA. In this process the students are placed in a vulnerable position as the receivers of the commentary and the teachers are perceived as an authoritative and instructive front, from whom unexpectedly positive or negative commentary is received. Depending on the approach used and the perception students have of commentary and feedback, the words used will significantly impact on the students' further thoughts regarding their learning process and its constituents. Moreover, the whole process of feedback, from the moment it is produced to the moment in which it is transmitted, can act as a trigger that would potentially increase students' FLCA or regulate students' anxiety levels.[14]. Given the complexity of the teacher's position regarding feedback, the idea that teachers have a significant level of direct responsibility connected to the FLCA of the students is reinforced.

For this reason, teachers aim to put into practice a meaningful and correct design and delivery of feedback. This can be accomplished through the study and use of different strategies and techniques that guide the teacher on the correct methods of implementing this process. Some of these techniques consider aspects such as the privacy and frequency of the delivery, the clarity of the commentary, and the content of the feedback [14]. Moreover, the reinforcement of positive and not judgmental believes in the students is ideal and crucial in a learning environment such as the English classroom. The idea that mistakes are acceptable, that resilience and perseverance are necessary features of the learner, and that feedback is a means of helping and not attacking are important aspects that teachers must consider.

The advocacy for a cautious approach on feedback by no means implies that feedback should be only positive or that students are not going to benefit from all types of feedback. Rather, it remarks that the teacher must be conscious at all moments of the position they have, and the repercussions feedback could have on the students' progress [14]. Educators should reflect on the intent and impact of their feedback, not just its delivery.

For example, if the feedback provided balances positive and negative aspects as well as solutions or pieces of advice, it would most likely be considered a source of important information in which learners can relay. Nevertheless, if the feedback given comes from a source of negative commentary and the motive behind its content is to humiliate or discourage students, then the feedback should be reconsidered, and the role of the teacher should be analyzed once again.

E.   Avoiding rigid classroom climates

Teachers influence students' FLCA based on the type of climate they create in their classrooms. This is related to the approach teachers have to the learning objectives for the students and the point to which strictness is applied. Teachers are in charge of creating or following objectives that take students to the proper level of language they need. For this, teachers will mostly follow a structural curriculum and from there they will move into the creation of spaces and tasks as steps through which students would learn. Nonetheless, once in the classroom, these steps are not linear or easy for either the teacher or the students to follow. When this happens, one may wonder which aspect is more important for the teacher; students meeting objectives in a controlled and content-centered environment, or students understanding and learning meaningfully even if this means not meeting all the objectives set in the expected manner.

When teachers prioritize strict adherence to the curriculum over meaningful learning, there are a series of aspects that affect the learning environment and consequently the students' reactions to it. One of the common results of this structural teaching practice is a behavioral approach to the learning dynamic, which promotes a more controlled and stricter environment in the classroom. This fails at promoting many key components for the effective language learning process, such as interaction and participation. Furthermore, teachers' attitudes have a big impact on the viewpoint students will have of the language and the learning process overall [4]. When teachers are focused on fulfilling a task or objective, this directly affects the attitudes and actions the teacher is going to reflect, and by doing this, the interactions with the students. If those interactions with the students are negative, an increase in FLCA is going to be seen [17].

It is imperative that teachers focus on the creation and fostering of safe-like and comfortable learning environments in which the learners can feel accepted. The creation of environments that encourage students to participate and interact while

learning can be beneficial for their language journeys [22]. At the same time, the promotion of positive interactions between the educators and the learners is another aspect that can ease the effects of FLCA in the students [8]. These elements related to classroom environment and interaction are responsibilities of the teacher [20] and it is through the management of the previously mentioned that FLCA can be decreased.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Being able to consider the students' perspective as ESL learners in the classroom, as well as to foster safe and helpful environments for students in which they can develop their learning skills, is the purpose behind promoting the awareness and understanding of FLCA to teachers in the field. In regard to this phenomenon, ESL teachers are always in a crucial position in their students' language acquisition process. Especially, when referring to Costa Rican students in the public high schools, these are in a constant need for teachers who are able to understand their realities as students of a developing country that is rapidly moving forward and the concerns they have as future adults of this country. Even though FLCA has never been proven to be directly or solely dictated by the teacher in the classroom, there is an ethical element in teaching that aims for them to analyze their actions and further purposes in order to be able to help students overcome anxiety to the extent they possibly can.

Concealing that teachers' behaviors and decisions that go unchecked could produce damage in the language journeys of the students, this paper advocates for the boost of teachers' interest in the development and improvement of the learning environment through their positive behavior and decisions. Furthermore, teachers require to acknowledge their ability to ease students' concerns and be willing to question and evaluate themselves to understand their main objectives and priorities when teaching. Given that empathy in the shape of assistance, understanding, and relay feedback could make a big change in a tough but rewarding learning process as the one of a second language, the awareness of this condition's importance is crucial to affect students' FLCA positively. Finally, certainly, the classroom might not reflect that the learning of a language is a living experience that students encounter every time they go to class, but it certainly is. For this reason, being open to mistakes and struggles and accepting that progress cannot be possible without flexibility is what will allow students to flourish into better learners and English speakers.

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